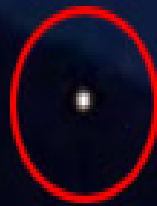


INDIAN SKEPTIC

No. 02/02

February 2011

- Sabarimala Makara Jyothi: Man Made ‘Divinity’
- Sabarimala – Recurring Tragedy Caused by State-Sponsored Superstition



- NDTV Report On Makara Jyothi
- Book Review:
Searching For The Sun In Candle Light...

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*It shall be the duty
of every citizen of
India -

to develop the
scientific temper,
humanism and the
spirit of inquiry and
reform*

*(Article 51A (h) Part IVA -
Fundamental Duties,
Constitution of India)*

Sabarimala Makar Jyothi: Man Made 'Divinity'

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Sabarimala Makara Jyothi: Man Made ‘Divinity’

Ram Puniyani

One has heard that faith can move the mountains, but this year a mountain could not stand the weight of faith. Tragically on 14th Jan, 2011, a hillock where thousands of devotees had congregated to have a glimpse of Makara Jyothi, due to the melee of the devotees, the hillock crumbled resulting in the stampede and death of 102 people. Makar Jyothi is supposed to be the divine light, appearing in the sky to pay tribute to lord Ayyappa. Similarly at the same place 52 people died in 1999 on the same date.

This raises multiple questions. It goes without saying that the government has to ensure that the civic arrangements have to be perfected even in the matters related to faith. Be it Kumbh mela or Haj, while the government should not interfere in the people's choices, the civic arrangements



can not just be left to the bodies managing these events. There is a small problem here, some managements are very rigid and one recalls that at Sabrimala, few years ago the temple authorities refused to let a woman IAS officer, who was supposed to ensure that arrangements are in place, was refused entry to the temple on the ground that women of menstruating age group (15-45) are not permitted to enter the temple as Lord Ayyappa is a bachelor!

Sabrimala congregation of the 14th April is the second biggest religious congregation in the country. While there are various diverse interpretation of the history of Sabrimala shrine and Lord Ayyappa, one thing is very clear and that is the devotees also pay the homage to Waver, a Muslim. He is addressed as Waver Swami by the pilgrims. The Hindus believe that they must first visit this Waver mosque.

Some dimensions of Sabrimala episode are very shocking to say the least. The divine light is supposed to be the *Aarti*, devotional ritual with a lamp and song, offered by Sages to Lord Ayyappa. As such the reality is that the light is due to the huge chunks of



camphor placed in urns which are burnt by the state electricity board officials on that day. Earlier Adivasis used to create fire as a devotion to the Lord. Many decades earlier the Adivasi ritual was going in to oblivion. This ritual has been taken over by the Temple trust, Ayyappa Devaswam, and through the state complicity burning of camphor was started at good distance from the temple. It was propagated that it is a divine light and different stories started being associated with the light. Gradually it was popularized that watching the divine light is a good omen, for which thousands and later lakhs of pilgrims started making a beeline for the area. To have the vantage point of view the people started congregating on the hill, which is crowded to the hilt. This also brought in good amount of money as the offering to the temple trust.

The government cannot be excused in any way for the lapse in the arrangement and being part of camphor burning to create 'divine light'. The temple trust can neither be excused for continuing this fraud, nor for interfering in the Government work,



when it makes the rule that Government female officials cannot enter the precincts of this place for making the arrangements. With such massive loss of lives, the responsibility of the tragedy should be squarely placed on the heads of the authorities concerned. One is shocked to know that the minister in charge of temple

"Makara Jyothi" as seen from Sabarimala



affairs in Kerala has been aware of this fact but has not done anything to stop the man-made light being propagated off as the divine light inviting the hoards of pilgrims from all over. The Devaswom Minister G Sudhakaran openly said a couple of years ago that "I was present on the Makaravillukku day at the Sabarimala last season. I saw the celestial star and it is at that very time that Makaravilakku is lighted. There is no doubt about it that it is lighted by the men."

This also raises larger questions about the acts of our authorities, including the religious trusts. While one respects the faith of devotees, what does one do if one knows clearly that the particular event is man made and is being passed off as a divine happening. Our Constitution instructs us to promote the rational thought and scientific temper. In Kerala various groups working for rational thought have been struggling to bring to light the truth behind this phenomenon. They have been campaigning to stop it, but to no avail. Faith often can be a big support system for society but one has also to know the difference between faith and blind faith. If we know the rational explanation about a phenomenon, should we sit over it or make it public. One also recalls that faith was constructed around the scientific phenomenon of 'capillary action' to spread the rumor that Lord Ganesha idol is drinking milk! And tons of milk went down the drain, with some top politicians endorsing the phenomenon, violating the basic norm of Indian Constitution.

The most difficult part of explaining matters of faith and opposing blind faith is the fact that faith is associated with religion and so a Benny Hinn will go on to give religious veneer to the well understood psychological phenomenon of hypnosis or hypnotherapy. Most of those struggling for social transformation for better society, better rights for deprived have opposed the blind faith and bypassed faith based understanding. Starting from Charvak of Lokayat tradition, to Lord Gautam Buddha, to the saints like Kabir, Tukaram to Mahatma Jotiba Phule and Dr Ambedkar all called for promotion of rational thought in their own way. Gandhi while recognizing the state of people in the society talked in the language of religion but kept the faith based rituals miles away. Nehru was most forthright in his opposition to the misuse of faith and talked for promotion of scientific temper, something which is not much in vogue in current times. Currently, misuse of faith is the order of the day. Nehru's emphasis on scientific temper and his opposition to blind faith has been a major pillar for growth of Modern India. One must see the complex situation prevailing today where we need to respect the people with all their frailties and still try to also put forth the rational view of things in an honest way.

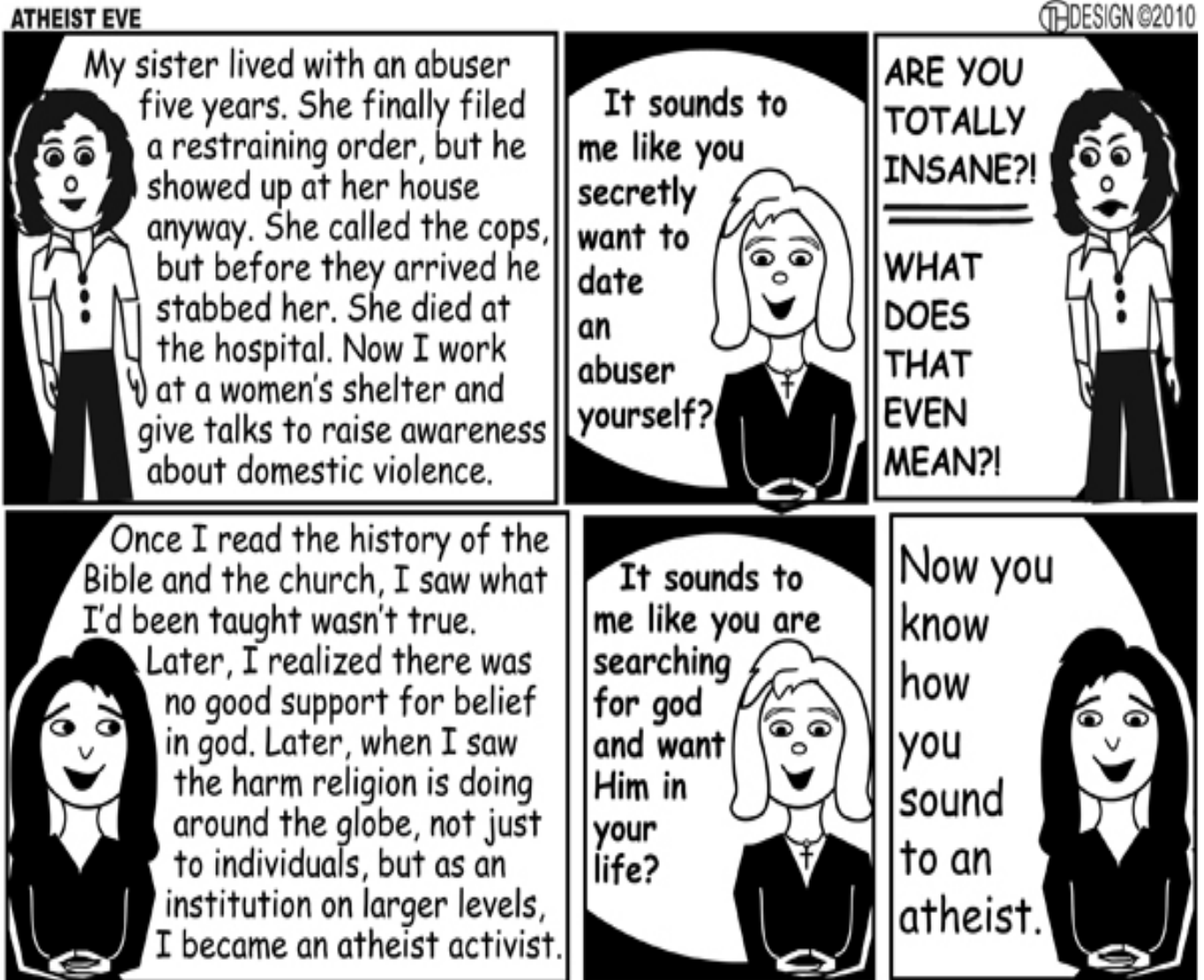
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Dr Ram Puniyani was Professor of Biomedical Engineering at IIT Mumbai. Currently he is associated with various secular initiatives. His website - www.pluralindia.com

Freedom of thought is the only good that is perhaps more precious than peace, for the simple reason that, without it, peace would merely be another name for servitude.

Andre Compte-Sponville

Searching For God!



Tracie Harris is a graphic designer in Austin, Texas, US. According to the website, <http://www.atheist-community.org/>, "her long, slow recovery from a rabid fundamentalist upbringing led her to the creation of *Atheist Eve*".

Tracie Harris has been publishing *Atheist Eve* since 1 October 2004 and all her earlier works are archived at: <http://www.atheist-community.org/atheisteve/>. *Atheist Eve* is reproduced by *Indian Skeptic* with the author's permission.

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Sabarimala – Recurring Tragedy Caused by State-Sponsored Superstition

Manoj TV

It has happened yet again. Over 100 persons were killed and as many were seriously injured in an easily avoidable tragedy at the ‘holy’ Sabarimala hills in Kerala on the night of January 14, 2011. As per newspaper reports, the tragedy occurred when the pilgrims were returning after witnessing the Makra Jyothi, the ‘miraculous’ appearance of Lord Ayyappa, the presiding deity of the Sabarimala temple. A report in the Mathrubhumi daily (15 January, 2011) says most of the dead were from Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka.

Exactly 12 years ago, on the night of 14 January, 1999 about 53 persons were killed in a similar stampede when the pilgrims were returning after witnessing the ‘divine celestial light’. The government then instituted an inquiry commission and nobody knows what precise actions were taken by the state authorities to avoid similar tragedies in future. The government has yet again instituted a commission to look into the latest one and as usual the report will be conveniently buried as the government fills its coffers with the blood-money of the poor and illiterate pilgrims by shamelessly promoting this nonsense of religious tourism by setting up an official magic show every year (*See the Appendix-I below for details of the government-sponsored magic called Makara Jyothi*).

Whoever be the inquiry commission members, one thing is sure - they will not touch the real issues involved. They will undoubtedly suggest various proposals to help the pilgrims to conveniently witness

the ‘divine light’. Most of the proposals will be impractical because unlike the Tirupati temple (which attracts the highest number of pilgrims in India, the second being Sabarimala), the Sabarimala temple is situated in the middle of a forest. And if at all the government builds roads and other infrastructures for the convenience of the millions of pilgrims visiting the shrine every year, that will irretrievably ruin the ecologically sensitive Sabarimala forest; it will be an environmental disaster.

What is the way out?

As of now, I am told, the road to the Sabarimala temple is strewn with plastic bottles and other non-biodegradable waste dumped by the devotees. During the Makra Vilakku season, the ‘holy’ river Pampa turns into a stream of human excreta – because in the absence of adequate number of toilets, the millions of pilgrims defecate right along their holy river. They take bath in the very same river unmindful of the health hazards involved. Nobody keeps count of the people who fall ill (even die) as a result of the unhygienic hill surroundings. I am told, the well-to-do among the pilgrims do not spend much time in the hills – after visiting the temple they rush back to nearby town and stay in better hotels to spend the night.

Given that nobody can stop pilgrims visiting the hill temple, the only solution is limiting the number of people visiting the shrine every season, every year. In consultation with competent professionals (not religious heads), the government should impose an upper limit on the

number of pilgrims visiting the temple.

When the government-sponsored fraud of Makara Jyothi was exposed by the activists of Kerala Yukthivadi Sangham in 1981 and as a result of the relentless campaign mounted by them for more than two decades, the temple authorities themselves came out with the truth. On 28 May 2008, the Sabarimala head-priest, Kanatararu Maheswararu Thantri, gave a press-statement that there was nothing miraculous in the Makra Jyothi and that it was man-made (*See Appendix-III*)

Unfortunately, this statement of Sabarimala authorities has not got wide publicity outside Kerala. For the vast majority of the pilgrims coming from other parts of the country, the Makara Jyothi continues to be a miracle. The media who broadcast live the lighting of Makara Jyothi with frenzied background commentary say nothing about the drama being enacted at Ponnambalamedu to fool the millions. The state government who can and has every right to stop this fraud will not do so claiming that it is a question of faith. G.Sudharakarn, the then Devaswam Minister of Left Front Government, in fact said that they are just conducting a puja and the government had no business to stop it. This gentleman was unmindful of the fact that the land on which the lighting (or puja, if that is what they want to call it) takes place is the property of the government – it is not the property of either the Sabarimala temple or even the Devaswom Board. Hence the government can stop it if they want to. But no government – left, centre or right - will do that. If they do, that indeed will be a bigger miracle.

What is the way out? Now that they themselves have come out with the truth the Makra Jyothi is man-made, the government and the Devaswom board should take initiative to publicize the fact. This is at least what we expect from a Left Front government before they bow out in the next general election. Also, when they

telecast the sighting of Makra Jyothi from the Sabarimala Hills next year onwards, they should also simultaneously telecast live the ‘puja’ (or whatever it be) conducted at Ponnambalamedu which appears to the pilgrims at the Sabarimala Hills as a celestial one. The telecast should not leave even an iota of doubt among the pilgrims that the Makara Jyothi is indeed man-made and not a miracle. This will perhaps reduce the frenzy with which the pilgrims view it. The Sabarimala will no doubt continue to attract pilgrims in millions whether there is a Makra Jyothi or not – as many of my friends who do not believe in this miracle but visit the temple every year confirms. But the madness that we witness during the Makara Vilakku season may come down to considerable extent. Let us avoid this recurring entirely man-made human tragedy.

Makara Jyothi

Let us now get on to the magic of Makara Jyothi. We reproduce two articles (with slight modifications) we published a few years back in the ezine *Bangalore Skeptic*, the predecessor of *Indian Skeptic*. We also reproduce the commentary of Rajesh Ramachandran, the correspondent of NDTV, who visited Ponnambalamedu in February 2007 (Appendix-II). Though the video-clipping of the report is no longer available on the NDTV website (it used to be here: <http://www.ndtv.com/convergence/ndtv/video.s.aspx?id=10648>), if anyone is in need of it, they can contact us (bskeptic@gmail.com)

BS

**You must be the change you
wish to see in the world**

M K Gandhi

Makara Jyothi – A State Sponsored Fraud

Bangalore Skeptic

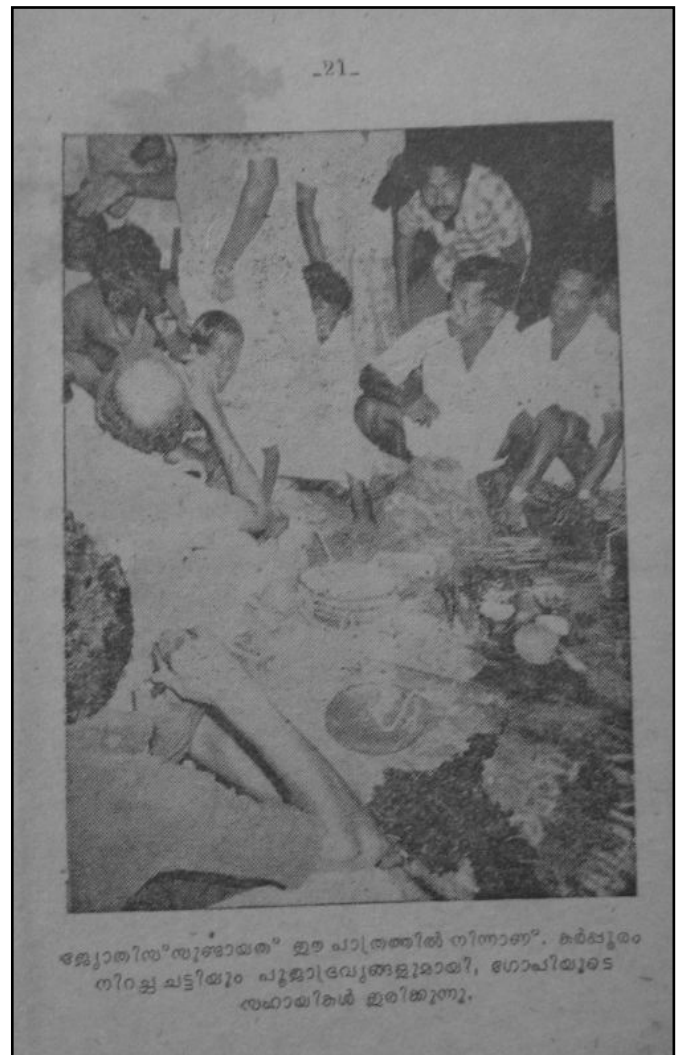
(January 2008)

Come December, a section of the people in South India goes crazy. The men (generally from the middle and lower middle class) who, during the other parts of the year, use the latest having gadgets, creams, and assorted liquids to have an “axe-effect” suddenly start roaming around with a fungus face. Some others (generally from the working class) toss away their footwear and strut around barefoot, unmindful of the health hazards involved. They shed their colorful clothes – because anything other than black suddenly becomes anathema to them. Welcome to the Sabarimala season. This crazy behavior reaches its peak just before January 14. It is on that evening – between 6.14 pm and 6.40 pm, to be more precise – that the Government of Kerala, with their eyes on the revenue brought by the devotees from outside the state, perpetrates a massive spiritual fraud – Makara Jyothi - upon the public, every year.

What the devotees believe

It is believed by the devotees that the Makara Jyothi appears miraculously at Ponnambalamedu (believed to be the abode of Swami Ayyappan, the presiding deity of the Sabarimala temple) and is the celestial manifestation of the god Ayyappan himself. Some others believe that the Jyothi is an arathi performed by the rishis and devas residing in the hills. The temple authority also takes great care to spread stories that the Ponnambalamedu is inaccessible to human beings and if anybody tries to reach there, he/she will have a miserable end.

Concocted stories about spontaneous curing of incurable diseases or of blind persons who regained their eyesight after witnessing this Jyothi etc are planted in the media. The media, with a very few exceptions, trumpet these stories without



Devaswom authorities and their associates in KSEB getting ready to light makarajyothi in 1981 – Scanned image from the pamphlet published by Kerala Yuktivadi Sangham

bothering to investigate what is happening behind the meticulous appearance of the Jyothi, year after year. The credulous devotees who fall for anything if it comes with a religious tag flock to the temple to witness this miracle.

What actually happens?

The skeptics and rationalists have always challenged these cock-and-bull stories and had on numerous occasions exposed the fraudulent drama enacted by the temple authorities with the covert help extended by various departments of the Government of Kerala. The most successful attempt at exposing this fraud was made in the year 1981, when a bus-full of skeptics (activists of Kerala Yukthivadi Sangham) landed with fire crackers and cameras in hand, on the evening of January 14, at Ponnambalamedu, the very spot where this drama was enacted. The Yukthivadi Sangham printed a pamphlet, ***Makrajyothi: a Fraud (Makarajyothis Enna Thattippu)*** and sold thousands of copies through out

Kerala in the 1980s and 1990s. This brought about a dramatic change among the believers in Kerala as far as Makra Jyothi is concerned, though many continue to worship Sabarimala Ayyappan. What follows is based upon the pamphlet and it gives a glimpse into what had happened on 14 January 1981. It continues to be enacted in the same fashion, though the actual actors might have changed.

“Ponnambalamedu is a flat grass-land spotted with a few trees. About half a kilometer away from there was stationed a Jeep (Registration Number: KRV 989) belonging to Travancore Devaswam Board. A crowd of about 500 persons including women and children (mostly relatives and friends of employees of Kerala State Electricity Board, who manages the nearby Sabarigiri Hydroelectric Project) had come to the site to witness the lighting of the Makara Jyothi. At about 6.30 PM, V.R.Gopinathan Nair, the driver with the Kerala Electricity Board, and his accomplices filled a platter with camphor.



At about 6.40 PM, when they received a signal (a flashlight) from Sabarimala, Gopinathan Nair lit the camphor and raised it thrice facing Sabarimala. Interestingly, the rationalists who assembled there also lighted some crude torches and firecrackers. The radio commentators and reporters of newspapers, clueless about the presence of rationalists/debunkers and their tactics, faithfully reproduced what they saw.

"There it raises the Makrajyothi; first as a lightning, then as a lamp or star and now as camphor light...there it raises, disappears, and then appears again..!" (Translation of a live Malayalam Commentary on Akashavani, 14 January 1981)

"Makara Jyothis appeared, not once but many times" (Mathrubhumi daily, 15 January 1981)

"Next to the Jyothis, there also appeared a

number of small lights" (Deepika daily, daily, 15 January 1981)

These reports about repeated and multiple appearance of Makarajyothi (as against the divine number three!) on that day undoubtedly refer to the torches and crackers lit by none other than the debunkers.

Enraged by the exposure, the temple authorities instigated the officials of the Road Transport Office who then lodged a case against the owner of the bus used by the activists to reach Ponnambalamedu. (As no case could be registered against the rationalist activists, the bus owner was later fined with 1000 rupees for plying the bus in an unauthorized route without the prior permission of the Road Transport Office). From the next year onwards, this fraud is being perpetrated under the protection provided by the state police".



Rationalists shouting slogans at Ponnambalamedu on 14 January 1981



പൊത്തയലമട്ടിൽ തുക്തീവാദികൾ
മുദ്രാവാക്യം വിളിക്കുന്നു.

Sabarimala Miracle Claims Disputed

*NDTV Correspondent, Thursday, January 11, 2007
(Ponnambalamedu)*

In February 2007, Rajesh Ramachandran, a correspondent of the NDTV filed a report from Ponnambalamedu - a first ever expose by a national TV channel. The correspondent took the viewers through the jungle to the very spot where the 'miraculous jyothi' is lit every year. The video clippings accompanying the report show the police barricade guarding the road leading to Ponnambalamedu. The place now has a neat concrete slab to perform the puja prior to the lighting of the divine miracle.

Makaravilakku or the festival of divine light at Sabarimala draws the second largest number of pilgrims in the country. Devotees say the appearance of the light three times is a miracle but some say it is a set up.

Every Makar Sakranthi at 6.30 pm the summit of a hill opposite the Ayyappa temple lights up. Government broadcasters Doordarshan and All India Radio cover the annual event live. The divine light or Makarajyothi draws a million devotees according to the Devaswom Board, which runs the temple management. Pilgrims stream in from several states, some of them hold on to vantage positions for several days to witness the event.

"A light appears on the hill, it's a miraculous thing and that is why pilgrims are coming," says the President of Travancore Devaswom Board Raman Nair.

Not a miracle

A former employee of the Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) Shivananda

claims the light is not a miracle. "When I got transferred to the Pampa division of KSEB near Sabarimala, I got an opportunity to actually see this light being lit in 1981," he said. "A Devaswom Board assistant engineer Karunakaran Nair, two policemen and two labourers had come there. They had one or two kilograms of camphor and an aluminium vessel. The light was lit by a KSEB driver VR

NDTV correspondent on the road leading to Ponnambalamedu



Gopinathan Nair," Shivananda explains. This version of the light is widely known in Kerala but rarely discussed.

Devasnom Minister G Sudhakaran says, "nobody has examined it, government never inquired into it, we are not planning to inquire into that because that is related to the faith of devotees for hundreds of years." "As far as the temple is concerned as far as the belief is concerned it is not good for the government to inquire " Sudhakaran said.

But as the pilgrims increased in the mid-eighties the enterprise drew in more personnel and resources including a large contingent of police making it harder to conceal. Till the early 1980s igniting the light was confined to a small group of KSEB employees who helped the Devaswom Board.

Another former KSEB employee says, "when I went there in 1986, the police had completely cordoned off the area. They let in only a few people whom they knew well. Officials from Devaswom Board lit the light".

Closely guarded site

A forest road runs from Vandi Periyar, 100 kms from Kottayam. Of Kochu Pampa, midway to Sabarigiri hydel project a mud track goes inside the reserve forest. The forest department closely guards the road. The key to a barricade on the road is with the nearest forest check post a couple of kilometers away. The forest department reportedly opens the barricade and lets Dewasom and police officials into Ponnambalamedu where the miracle is set up.



"Makarajyoti is the biggest ritualistic fraud in the country which has disastrous social and ecological impact," Dr PM Rajan Gurukkal, director of the School of Social Sciences said. "On that day many people remain in vulnerable positions unmindful of the danger to see the state sponsored magic. The core of the whole activity is commerce. It generates a lot of money and a miracle attracts a lot of people".

In 1999 a stampede among pilgrims gathered to see the light left 52 people dead."

Though the video clipping seems to have been removed from their website, the text of the report can still be accessed. Here is the link:

<http://www.ndtv.com/convergence/ndtv/story.aspx?id=NEWEN20070000611>

BS

Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious convictions.

Blaise Pascal

Makara Jyothi Is Man-Made

Priest's Confession And A Minister's Summersault

Bangalore Skeptic (June 2008)

In our January 2008 issue (See MAKARA JYOTHI – a state sponsored fraud, Bangalore Skeptic, No.1) we documented the true story behind the ‘divine light’ (rather, ‘divine fraud’) of Makara Jyothi at the Sabarimala shrine in Kerala. We reported that the fraud had been perpetrated by the authorities of Sabarimala temple with the active support of various departments of Government of Kerala (including the state police) upon the credulous devotees for decades. We narrated in detail the story of the successful attempt made by the rationalists in 1981 to expose this massive fraud. That year, the rationalists photographed the entire sequence of events leading to the very lighting of the ‘divine’ Jyothi. We also brought to the attention of our readers the expose made by the television news channel NDTV 24 X 7 on 11 January 2007, when its correspondent, Rajesh Ramachandran, filed a report from Ponnambalamedu itself with appropriate visuals. (The readers may recall the myth prevalent among the Sabarimala devotees that Ponnambalamedu is the abode of Lord Ayyappa and is not accessible to human beings).

Unfortunately, the reports of none of these exposes reached the teeming multitude that throng the hill shrine every season; especially those devotees belonging to the states other than Kerala. The governments (both the Left and the non-Left), with their eyes on the huge revenue brought into the state by the devotees, continued to

perpetrate this fraud, season after season, year after year. Since 1982 this fraud has been perpetrated under heavy police protection. The rationalist activists who attempted to visit the place again in 1982 and later were roughed up by the police. The lighting of the Makara Jyothi also resulted in heavy human casualties at Sabarimala itself. In 1999, for instance, 52 devotees were killed in a stampede while witnessing, to use the eminent historian Dr. Rajan Gurukkal’s pithy epithet, the “state sponsored magic”.

Priest’s confession

Now, for the first time the Sabarimala priests themselves have come out with the truth. On 28 May 2008, Kantararu Maheswararu Thantri, the head priest of Sabarimala, said in a press statement that there was nothing divine in the “Jyothi” and that it was man-made. The immediate back ground to this belated confession was the violent protests witnessed in Kerala against all kinds of godmen and other spiritual quacks following the recent arrest of Santhosh Madhavan alias Swami Amritachaitanya, a self-styled godman. The media, which shamelessly promoted this ‘miracle’ for all these years and refused to give any coverage to rationalists’ attempts to expose the fraud, has now started to come out with the truth.

Unfortunately, even while reluctantly coming out with the facts, the temple priest tried to further befuddle the devotees rather

than to clarify the issues. The tantr in his press statement said that the devotees confused Makra Jyothi with Makara Vilakku, and that Makara Jyothi is a star that appears on the sky whereas Makara Vilakku is man-made. What has been called Makara Jyothi is in fact Makara Vilakku that is man-made whereas Makara Jyothi is a star appearing in the sky, which is still a miracle! Confused? That precisely is what they want. Confound the devotees, retain the flock and rake in more money.

There however has never been any confusion so far, not only among the

why the temple authorities did not earlier clarify for the benefit of devotees the difference between the 'real' Makara Jyothi and the so-called Makra Vilakku. Why this sudden realization now? The answer is the priests, the Dewaswom Board, and the government can continue to assert that the Makara Jyothi is still a miracle, though they now will be pointing to a different direction, towards a star! It is you, the devotees, who made the mistake and we, the authorities, are pristine innocent! You now look at the star, a miracle and continue to fill our coffers!

Don't the media have a responsibility to explain to their readers why they had not sent their investigate reporters to unearth this monumental fraud? Don't they have a duty to inform their readers why they had blacked out all these years well documented exposes made by the rationalists? Is it not a simple truth that it was with the active support of the media that this fraud has grown into gargantuan proportions that it is today?

devotees but among the Sabarimala authorities too. All the books and reports published by the Sabarimala authorities themselves unequivocally claimed that this "miraculous" light indeed was Makara Jyothi. The media – print, radio, and television – have always referred to this flicker of light as Makara Jyothi. The term Makra Vilakku has generally been used to refer to the whole festival celebrated in Sabarimala in the month of, as per Malayalam calendar Makram. In Malayalam, the Makara Jyothi also is sometimes called Makra Vilakku. But there has never been any confusion as to what Makrajyothi was, until the priest came out with the press statement. Do a 'google' search on Makra Jyothi and it will directly take you to this "miracle" – nowhere else.

The question to be asked in this context is

The role of media

The media do not fare better. While lambasting the government for misleading the devotees for years, the media does not bother to devote even a line for self-criticism. Don't the media have a responsibility to explain to their readers why they had not sent their investigate reporters to unearth this monumental fraud? Don't they have a duty to inform their readers why they had blacked out all these years well documented exposes made by the rationalists? Is it not a simple truth that it was with the active support of the media that this fraud has grown into gargantuan proportions that it is today?

The media not only refuse to admit their complicity in perpetuating the fraud, but continue to parrot the absurd claims made

by the temple authorities. The New Indian Express, for instance, states in their editorial that, to quote, “two more connected events still evade scientific explanation: Just before the Vilakku appears a star rises in the sky and a kite hovers over the temple!” (See NIE, dated 29.05.2008). The truth is there is no miracle in these. The star that the editorial refers to, can be seen not only from Sabarimala but from elsewhere too. It does not appear just on the day of Makarajyothi, it is always there. As to the hovering of a kite, kites are a common species of birds abundant in these parts and they are normally attracted by filth for which Sabarimala is notorious. Moreover, kites can easily be tamed (the readers may note that kites are very efficiently used in falconry in the Middle East) and hence it is always possible for the temple authorities to release a trained kite right on time for the devotees to shout hysterically “*Swamiye Saranamayyppa*”!

Minister’s summersault

The most pathetic statements came from G.Sudhakaran, the state Minister for temple affairs; shameless because he is a CPI (M) MLA. He not only parroted the statements made by the temple priest to deliberately befuddle the people, but given his own justification for the perpetration of the

fraud – “Makarajyothi and Makaravilakku are not the same things, the later of which is man-made. Religion could not be subjected to rational analysis and our government did not want to go with the rationalists on this issue” (Mathrubhumi daily, Kannur edition, 29.05.2008). It is this same gentleman who told NDTV just a little more than a year before that, to quote, “nobody has examined it, government never inquired into it, we are not planning to inquire into that because that is related to the faith of devotees for hundreds of years” (see the transcripts reproduced in this issue of Bangalore Skeptic).

How has the minister suddenly got enlightened about the human-hand behind the “miracle” which “nobody has ever examined” as he claimed earlier? Why did he feign ignorance about sending a posse of policemen by his own government to guard the creation of this fraud by employees of various government departments, including his own, on a land owned by the government? What is in this fraud that takes it beyond the purview of a rational scrutiny as the minister claims? Can we be faulted if we suspect a collusion between the priest and the ministry in giving a press statement deliberately to confuse and continue to defraud millions of people?

BS

If God doesn’t show himself – at least, not to me and not to everyone – it might be because he feels like hiding. It might also be, and this seems to me a far simpler hypothesis, because he does not exist.

Andre Compte-Sponville

The Book of Atheist Spirituality (2007)

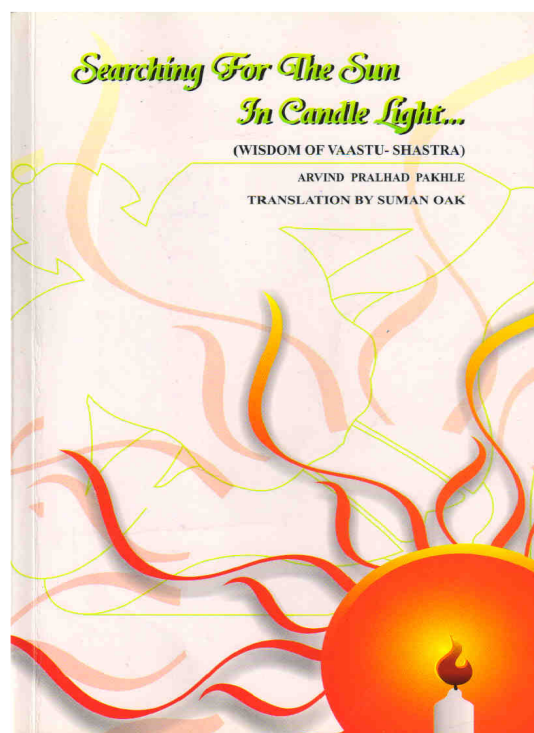


Fraudulent Use of Obsolete *Vaastushastra*

Prabhakar Nanawaty

As highlighted in the Forward written by Prof. R. V. Kolhatkar, Ex Director of Institute of Architecture and Design, Hyderabad, if one goes to any bookstall on airport, railway station or even remotely located town bus stand, there will be number attractively printed and colored books praising *Vaastushastra* displayed prominently in the showcase. And of course, there are customers who are ready to pay the fancy prices to buy them. But you may not find a single book challenging and exposing the myths built around *Vaastushastra*. Perhaps this so called *Shastra* is built upon endless untruths and it may be very difficult to expose all the untruths. However *Searching For The Sun In Candle Light...* written by Arvind Pakhle is one book which attempts to expose the frauds and falsehoods of the *Vaastushastra*. In fact this book is a 'collage' of extracts from many articles, books, conversations and discourses. Since the author is a practicing builder and developer of real estate in and around Pune, he has collected wisdom of truths about *Vaastushastra* during his professional career and has brought out them in the book form to help the frightening and gullible common people.

It is quite surprising that no one had heard of this ancient wisdom on architecture till 1980's and it suddenly appeared on the



stage and caught fancy of middle class and rich class as though it is one time remedy for all the problems associated with fast moving life in recent years. One cannot forget that the progress of the society was not at all hampered in those 2000 years earlier to recent fad of *Vaastushastra*. In fact one can boldly say that it appears that when *Vaastushastra* was not practiced then only the society made lot of progress and brought happiness and worldly comforts to the individual and society.

The author has tried to trace the historical

background of *Vaastushastra*. According to him the cities of Harappa and Mohenjodaro evolved around 2300 BC were well planned. . However, all this huge evidence of progress made in housing and town planning by the old culture was devoid of any mention of *Vaastushastra*. The Aryan tribes, arriving from the cold grass lands of central Asia entering into Sindhu valley in the northwest India, enslaved the native people and stabilized their own colonies. They needed to establish their superiority over the civilized natives. In this endeavor they invented abstract and mystifying concepts like heaven, hell, *Moksha*, *Mantrashakti*, and of course *Chaturvarnya* – caste system. They believed in *Yadnya Veda* which appears to be the root of

called '*Shastra*' is quite strange which includes imaginary stories, imaginary characters like *Vaastupurush*, the concepts like *Vaastumandal* and *Brahmasthan* etc. In fact author had devoted a full chapter on this *Brahmasthan* and proves beyond doubt how it is impractical and illogical. Everything appears to be fantasy in this so called ancient art of building constructions. In the chapter on *Prudence in Vaastushastra*, author tries to see the whole scene through the eyes of *Vaastu* experts and feels that this cannot be science at all.

While commenting on present situation, the author feels that the contemporary *Vaastushastra* as practiced by the experts selectively uses the dictates of ancient

The book, written by Arvind Pakhle, a practicing builder and developer or real estate, exposes the frauds and falsehoods of the *Vaastushastra*....It is quite surprising that no one had ever heard of this "ancient wisdom" on architecture till 1980's and it suddenly appeared on the stage and caught the fancy of middle class and rich class as though it is one time remedy for all the problems associated with fast moving life in recent years.

Vaastushastra.. Their philosophy was founded on symbolism. Their Vedic culture gave birth to concepts like *Shilpshastra*, *Manasar* and *Mayamat*. Amongst them *Shilpshastra* narrates the basic principles of Vedic philosophy and might had more influence than other two concepts. The rules mentioned in *Shilpshastra* might have been propagated orally till recently. Author had listed a few details from *Shilpshastra* as samples. After going through these details one can conclude that the whole pseudoscience is constructed with the aim of strengthening the system of male dominance and the dominance of the society by the *Chaturvarnya* giving control to the Brahmins and subjugating the Shudras. The method of developing this so

wisdom which are advantageous to them. It has taken features regarding the eight directions, plays with the meanings of Sanskritised names of these directions and how the portion of the house in particular direction is to be utilized. No one can give logical explanations for why people staying in a building, water storage, toilet, veranda etc located in East will face the problems like sterility, death, eye disease, heart problem, paralysis etc; why stair case built in northeast should result in abortion, mental illness or sudden death. According to *Vaastu* authority northeast is God's direction; as such water tank should be in northeast, slope of the ground and street should be in the northeast. No one can give any logical explanation for these absurd

and totally irrelevant recommendations for house constructions to be built in 21st century or houses built in the last century. In fact the author convincingly explains citing examples of two representative layouts of the flats built as per *Vaastushastra* norms and concludes that it is impossible to build such a house/flat adhering to *Vaastushastra* criteria. He questions that does it mean that all those who live in the apartments not built as per *Vaastushastra* are leading a wretched life? Surprisingly these connoisseurs have instant answer for such objections too. As per their argument, every apartment has some features that are approved by this science and as such they are happy. If there is no happiness, then these so called specialists will come forward and bring happiness by restructuring (demolishing!) the whole house (and charging hefty fees!). Whatever may happen they never hesitate to blow their trumpet.

The author even takes issues like shapes of the plots, the slope of the ground, examining the soil, the compound wall, the compound gate, parking arrangements etc in threadbare details in which *Vaastushastra* experts usually have something to comment and concludes how bizarre it seems to follow the instructions of this so called science. In fact author wonders why the science of erecting the buildings had been linked to philosophy, religion and cosmic energy and why this science interlinks with 9 planets (*Navagrahas!*), 12 zodiac signs and 27 *Nakshatras*. However not a single book explains in what way the shape of the plot is related to its being auspicious or inauspicious. It is generally explained in terms of positive and negative energy. The whole trend of thought is simply incomprehensible. In fact shapes of the plots, directions of the roads, slopes of the grounds and even naming the eight directions are all handy work of the people. There is no point in attaching any importance to these aspects as long as they are convenient and masking them as lucky or unlucky. When science of construction

was in infant stage there were some empirical tests prescribed to examine the soil on which the house is to be built or slope, shape etc so as to minimize the construction cost as far as possible. But nowadays the construction technology had advanced so much so that it can overcome any issues relating foundation and one can construct building any where or on any soil condition irrespective of its colour or taste which was prime considerations in *Vaastushastra*. The criteria of *Vaastushastra* are not at all worth today.

The *Vaastu* experts even have some opinion about the parking space. The idea of parking space might not have been there at all while *Vaastushastra* was developed in ancient period. But the experts say that parking should be either in east or northwest or the north of the plot. All these conditions apparently are quite foolish. The parking space is generally determined by the availability of the space and number of vehicles and their reach on the road and not by directions, heights and slopes.

In spite of all these absurdities the people still fall prey to *Vaastu* experts. Probably the experts' aggressive marketing may be influencing their decisions or customers' predicaments. The talk of death of one's child, loss of wealth, incurable disease, being lost in debts, theft, accidents, calamity etc are such terrifying things, usually uttered by *Vaastu* experts, make listeners to take corrective action to their dwellings and spend the money. If *Vaastu* experts feel that customers is hesitant to spend the money as per their demand, the new breed of *Vaastu* experts have solutions even for this too. There will be some compromised solution and thus expert will extract money up to the last rupee. Nowadays they combine *Vaastushastra* of Indian origin with *Feng Shui* of China and suggest some methodologies to balance the 'energy'. For compensating the energy, they may suggest to place the tortoise (black!) a symbol of safety, long life and intellect, some photo frames, chimes etc thus swindling the customers. Earlier it was

thought that *Vaastushastra* and *Feng Shui* are competing with each other to claim success. But nowadays there is a holistic approach, thanks to globalization of superstitions!

The author had written open letter to the *Vaastu* experts and narrates his bitter experience of restructuring his own house as per *Vaastu* dictates to remove *Vaastu Doshas*. He lists these *Doshas* and what actions he took to reduce their ill effects. He even performed *Navachandi Yagnya*, started wearing *Pushkaraj* stone and a coral and made rings out of them to wear on fingers. But finally nothing good came out of all these. He concludes that these *Vaastu* professionals exploit the vulnerability and helplessness, the problems and misfortunes, the greed and temptations of gullible people constantly threatening them with dire consequences of not following their recommendations.

There are number of cartoons and quotations interspersed between the pages and are quite interesting. On the back

cover of the book author had given the full text of the declaration of scientists on the illusory *Vaastushastra* which was signed by Dr. Jayant Narlikar. This is also a worth reading material.

Searching For The Sun In Candle Light....
(Wisdom of Vaastushastra)

Arvind Pralhad Pakhale
(Translated by Ms Suman Oak)
Maharashtra Andhashraddha
Nirmoolan Samiti Publication (2006)
Rs 60/- pp 119

BS

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Believing in God is a sin of pride. It is imagining a grand cause for a meagre effect. Atheism, conversely, is a form of humility. No doubt about it: we are children of the earth – humus, when ‘humility’. We would do better to accept our earthly nature and invent the sky that goes along with it.

Andre Compte-Sponville
The Book of Atheist Spirituality (2007)

Skeptic News

yukti WORKSHOP

19,20 FEB 2011

Yukti 2011, is a 2 day interactive workshop to promote scientific temper among working professionals.

The workshop will bring together the foremost freethinkers from around the country, including **Narendra Nayak** and **Babu Gogineni**, for enlightened discussions on science, pseudo science and the paranormal.

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Talks and Workshops

Debunking Alternative Medicine Humanism and Outreach
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Logical Fallacies Debunking Paranormal and lot more..

Narendra Nayak has been a part of the Indian Rationalist movement for over three decades. He is the president of FIRA, the apex rationalist body of India, and has been widely featured in TV features, and the BBC investigation into Sathya Sai Baba. He has toured India widely and has conducted over 200 demonstrations, and 500 workshops.



Babu Gogineni is a secular humanist from Hyderabad. He is the executive director of the International Humanist and Ethical Union. A regular TV commentator on issues of Science, Human rights and Secularism, Babu has lectured in over 28 countries around the world. His campaigns have been featured on New York Times, CNN

Date : 19-20 Feb 2011

Time : 10am - 5pm

Registration Limited Seats

General - 300 Rs 100

Student - 150 Rs*

All registrations online. * ID required

Venue

Vijnana Bhavana, No. 24/2 & 24/3,
21 Main Road, Banashankari II Stage,
Bengaluru - 560070

email

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Rationalist
Federation

Federation of
Indian Rationalist
Associations

Skeptic News

Bangalore Vicharavadi Sangha (Bangalore Rationalist Association)

Bangalore Vicharavadi Sangha conducts monthly lectures and discussions on various topics. Those who are interested in attending the programmes conducted by the association may contact:

Dr. M.N.Keshava Rao (Phone: 26690269. Email: keshava_rao@hotmail.com)

A.S.Nataraj (Phone: 26696553. Email: rajsri@bgl.vsnl.net.in)

District Level meetings of Karnataka State Federation of Rationalist Associations are being convened across the state. Those who would like to be part of the organization are requested to contact the State

Convener of KSFRA

BVV Subba Rao. Phone: 09886679088.

Email: babukadur44@gmail.com

Tools for Skeptical Thinking

Carl Sagan

Carl Sagan's famous essay, *The Fine Art of Baloney Detection*, more or less encapsulates the basic tenets of Skeptical Thinking. The present article is an extract from the essay.

The full text can be found in one of Sagan's best-sellers *The Demonhaunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*.

- Wherever possible there must be independent confirmation of the "facts."

- Encourage substantive debate on the evidence by knowledgeable proponents of all points of view.

- Arguments from authority carry little weight—"authorities" have made mistakes in the past. They will do so again in the future. Perhaps a better way to say it is that in science there are no authorities; at most, there are experts.

- Spin more than one hypothesis. If there's something to be explained, think of all the different ways in which it could be explained. Then think of tests by which you might systematically disprove each of the alternatives. What survives, the hypothesis that resists disproof in this Darwinian selection among "multiple working hypotheses," has a much better chance of being the right answer than if you had simply run with the first idea that caught your fancy.

- Try not to get overly attached to a hypothesis just because it's yours. It's only a way station in the pursuit of knowledge. Ask yourself why you like the idea. Compare it fairly with the alternatives. See if you can find reasons for rejecting it. If you don't, others will.

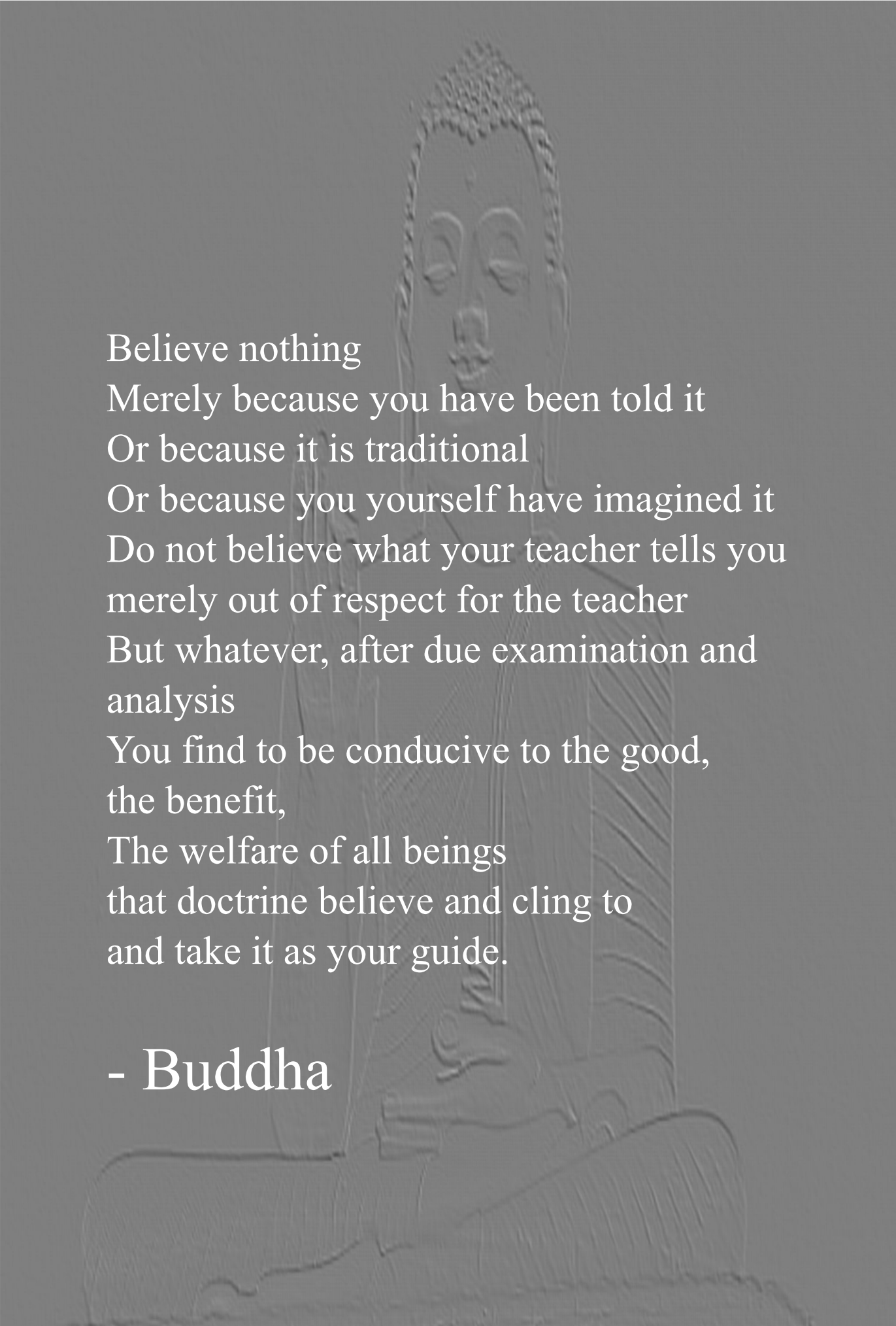


- Quantify. If whatever it is you're explaining has some measure, some numerical quantity attached to it, you'll be much better able to discriminate among competing hypotheses. What is vague and qualitative is open to many explanations. Of course there are truths to be sought in the many qualitative issues we are obliged to confront, but finding them is more challenging.

- If there's a chain of argument, every link in the chain must work (including the premise) —not just most of them.

- Occam's Razor. This convenient rule-of-thumb urges us when faced with two hypotheses that explain the data equally well to choose the simpler.

- Always ask whether the hypothesis can be, at least in principle, falsified. Propositions that are untestable, unfalsifiable are not worth much. You must be able to check assertions out. Inveterate skeptics must be given the chance to follow your reasoning, to duplicate your experiments and see if they get the same result.



Believe nothing
Merely because you have been told it
Or because it is traditional
Or because you yourself have imagined it
Do not believe what your teacher tells you
merely out of respect for the teacher
But whatever, after due examination and
analysis
You find to be conducive to the good,
the benefit,
The welfare of all beings
that doctrine believe and cling to
and take it as your guide.

- Buddha